

# *Report*

## Acadia National Park

### ■ 1.0 Site Description



Acadia National Park, located on Mount Desert Island (MDI), Maine, preserves 40,000 acres of Atlantic coast shoreline, mixed hardwood and spruce/fir forest, mountains, and lakes, as well as several offshore islands. A true jewel among National Parks, Acadia is visited by more than three million visitors annually. Visitation is highest in summer and lowest in winter. Because of its location on the Maine coast, it is a prime destination that experiences very high utilization in July and August, which can lead to congestion and crowded conditions. More than 90 percent of the park's visitation occurs between May and September and 1.7 million of the park's three million visitors see the park in June, July, and August.

MDI consists of four island towns (Bar Harbor (the commercial center), Southwest Harbor, Mount Desert, and Tremont). Together with the surrounding communities of Trenton, Lamoine, and Cranberry Isles, these towns collaborate as the Mount Desert Island League of Towns (MDILOT). The purpose of the League is to study issues common to Mount Desert Island communities and to recommend coordinated and cost-effective solutions.

Travel between these communities has traditionally been by automobile, although the park features many trails and carriage roads for a variety of non-automobile uses. Due to the lengthy distances between these communities, until recently it was difficult to explore the park without an automobile. Further, as the commercial center of the island, Bar Harbor is often overwhelmed by tourist traffic and oversubscription of parking areas, especially on weekend evenings in the summer as tourists patronize area restaurants.

To address the overcrowding and limitations to mobility, the MDILOT, in cooperation with the Park Service and others, has instituted an expanded transit system for Acadia, called the Island Explorer.

## ■ 2.0 Existing ATS

### **The Island Explorer**

The Island Explorer is a seasonal transportation system serving Acadia and the communities on MDI that began service in the summer of 1999. Previously, a limited-service transit operation was in place. The new system is intended to help sustain the strong tourist industry on MDI while reducing traffic congestion and motor vehicle emissions. The project is a public-private partnership involving federal, state and local agencies, and nonprofit and private partners.

### **Shuttle Implementation**

The transit system is being implemented in three phases. Phase 1 service began in June 1999 and includes eight propane-powered buses operating on six routes. The Village Green in Bar Harbor is the transit hub and transfer point for the service. The six routes connect the campgrounds and motels on MDI with the business districts of the four island towns and popular tourist destinations in Acadia. Phase 2, scheduled for implementation in June 2000, will enhance Phase 1 service by adding 10 more propane buses, thus permitting continuous service around the park loop road, more frequent service to the municipalities and campgrounds, and increased passenger capacity. Phase 3 will focus on supporting initiatives of the Maine Department of Transportation's Strategic Passenger Service Plan, including the possible development of a regional tourist center/multimodal transportation hub, pedestrian and bicycle links from the communities to the park, and connections with regional and international transportation systems.

The transit system is based on the principle that adequate tourist parking exists at the campgrounds and motels on MDI, but is lacking in the business districts of the towns and in the park. Overnight visitors are encouraged to leave their vehicles at the campgrounds and motels and to visit the park and the island communities via the transit system.

In addition to serving the four island towns and popular destinations in the park, the system also connects with the Hancock County Airport in Trenton, the state ferry terminal in Bass Harbor, the international ferry terminal in Bar Harbor, and the municipal waterfront areas.

The system is operated by Downeast Transportation Inc (DTI), a nonprofit transit provider. DTI has successfully operated a bus route serving campgrounds along State Route 3, including the Blackwoods Campground in Acadia since 1994. The successful campground shuttle bus service provided the model for the expanded island-wide system.

## Marketing Strategy

Several incentives have been incorporated into the base transit system to encourage visitors to use the buses:

- Vehicles are clean, modern, and efficient. Eight 28-passenger, fully accessible transit buses were purchased for the service. Each bus is equipped with exterior and interior bicycle racks with a capacity to transport up to five bicycles. The buses operate on propane fuel, producing fewer emissions and less noise than traditional buses.
- The service provides a direct connection with most motels and campgrounds on MDI at a reasonably high frequency. (The campground routes run hourly while the routes serving Route 3 motels, Sand Beach and Eagle Lake in the park run every 30-minutes.
- No fare is collected on the buses. A recent study, commissioned by the Park Service, found that 51 percent of visitors surveyed indicated they would use a free shuttle bus to access the park. However, only 25 percent of visitors surveyed said they would use the bus if a fee were charged. This is further supported by the dramatic increase in ridership that occurred when the fare for the campground shuttle was eliminated in the previous year of operation.
- Promotion of the service is extensive. A marketing plan, including visitor guides, maps, timetables, posters, public service announcements, and TV and radio messages were all developed. More than 50,000 copies of the visitor guide were printed and inserted in the park's newspaper, *Beaver Log*, and 70,000 visitor guides were produced as stand-alone items. The project was strongly supported by the Maine Office of Tourism and regional Chambers of Commerce.

## First Season Results

The first season of shuttle operation can be described as a remarkable success. The system planners had established a goal of 1,000 riders per day with an expectation of 700 riders per day. During the months of July and August (high season) ridership ranged between 2,000 and 3,000 per day. The total ridership was 142,000 visitors over a 76-day period. The high demand necessitated adding buses and trips to the system at extra cost.

Some of the other findings included:

- There were occasions when demand exceeded the capacity of the buses, typically in the late afternoon hours related to campground and motel trips. People staying in campgrounds would typically wish to return to their camp sites to prepare dinner. Motel guests would wish to travel between their motels and Bar Harbor or other commercial areas with restaurants.
- The visitor guide promoted a 20-mile bike route on the park loop road in conjunction with the bicycle rack-equipped buses. One could ride for distances of 3.6, 3.7, and 8.6 miles and at the end of each segment place the bicycle on the bus for the return trip. At times, the demand for bike rack space exceeded the capacity and riders had to wait for the next bus.

- In general, visitors to the park took the bus overcrowding in stride and viewed the service very favorably. The University of Maine survey is expected at the end of January. Results can be inserted here if available by then. Onboard surveys showed that the mode that people used to get to the park included all types of arrivals. Of those surveyed, 52 percent traveled to MDI by private vehicle, 27 percent by recreational vehicle (RV), and 21 percent by other means (ferry, air, sailboats, or commercial bus). In comparison, when the bus was offered in previous years as a campground route only with a \$2.00 fare, 97 percent of those who rode the bus traveled to MDI by RV. This was primarily due to the difficulty that RV owners would have in finding a place to park in town.

## 2000 Island Explorer Service

In 2000, an additional 10 buses are being added to the fleet and the service is expected to carry up to 250,000 visitors. It is also anticipated that trip frequencies will be increased on some routes and that bus managers will be able to respond to surges in demand. Another recent modification is that three of the new vehicles will be equipped with propane tanks that can withstand winter temperatures. These vehicles can then potentially be made available for use during non-summer months such as at a ski resort.

## Next Steps

In future years, the project will feature increased service and will begin to address transit-related infrastructure needs within the park and the adjacent communities. Extension of bus service into the fall visitor season is under consideration. Acadia has also been awarded Federal Lands Highway funds to redesign the Hulls Cove Visitor Center parking lot, construct a new Eagle Lake parking lot, and to make improvements to approximately 30 bus stops within the park.

The Town of Bar Harbor and the Maine Department of Transportation are working cooperatively to redesign the village green to better accommodate the shuttle buses. Proposed improvements include an information kiosk, bench, bus staging area, pedestrian paths and landscaping. Construction of the above projects will begin in the fall of 1999 and should be ready for service in June 2000.

In November 1999, a DOT/DOI joint funding announcement was made for \$2 million to implement intelligent transportation systems (ITS) at Acadia for a field operations test for rural ITS. This program will include advanced traveler information systems, automatic vehicle identification, vehicle fleet expansion, and other ITS resources.

## ■ 3.0 ATS Needs

The service implemented in 1999 was an overwhelming success. A number of additional needs remain, however. There is a strong emphasis on the need to integrate the island-

wide transit system with regional and statewide transportation initiatives. A number of planning issues identified by the park include:

- The development of a multimodal transportation and visitor information hub. The concept is to develop a single facility that could provide regional and statewide visitor information, education about and access to alternative transportation modes, and parking for day use visitors to ANP and MDI communities.
- The development of an island-wide pedestrian and bicycle plan. The goal is to develop a network of foot and bicycle trails that would allow visitors to move between the towns and between the towns and the Park without using a motor vehicle. Ultimately, this plan will lead to the need for construction funds.
- The development of a cruise ship-management plan to deal with the increasing number of cruise ships using Mount Desert Island ports. This study is funded by Maine DOT.

## ■ 4.0 Basis of ATS Needs

The Island Explorer at Acadia National Park is one of the true ATS success stories with the Park Service. The service has received very favorable publicity and is expected to grow in popularity. As the system continues to expand, the need for a dedicated source of funding is significant so that the program can be sustained well into the future.

In addition, a long-term strategy for the management and funding of the transit *system* is needed. Planning items include the location, size and scope of a bus storage facility, a maintenance, and fueling facility, the possible formation of a transit authority to oversee the system.

## ■ 5.0 Bibliography

*Island Explorer Free Acadia Shuttles* paper prepared by Len Bobinchock, Deputy Superintendent, Acadia National Park.

*Phase 2 Planning Report, Seasonal Public Transportation on Mount Desert Island*, June 1997-September 1997, Prepared for the MDI League of Towns and Downeast Transportation, Inc. by Tom Crikelair Associates.

Internet Web Site: [www.nps.gov/acad](http://www.nps.gov/acad).

## ■ 6.0 Person Interviewed

Len Bobinchock, Deputy Superintendent Acadia National Park